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Byronic Outcasts and Polish Exiles

Every student of Polish literature knows that English and German poetry played a significant role in the Polish Romantic breakthrough. Most of us studied the Byronic hero on the basis of Mickiewicz's translation of *The Giaour* at school, and view him as an antecedent of Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*, the mysterious remorse-torn national avenger figure. But I strongly suspect that because we are so familiar with this subject, we tend to ignore the intricacies involved in the Polish reception of British literature at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Mickiewicz's pronounced aim was to create Polish national literature, which he perceived as only beginning to develop in the poetry of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz and Franciszek Karpiński:

> Ancestors develop the language; that is what the poet has to find; that is what influences him. One has to wait a long time before the language [parallel to that] in which *Don Juan* was written develops.[1]

Byron's *Don Juan* with its complex challenge of literary and social conventions is seen here as an unachievable model. Mickiewicz believes that medieval ballads and romances offered the springboard on which English literature was able to develop, and such a tradition for him started only recently, that is at the end of the eighteenth century, to be developed in Polish poetry. In the case of Niemcewicz, translations and adaptations from English played a crucial part in this process.

What I propose to do in this paper is to examine Polish translations of two English poems dealing with the theme of exile: firstly Niemcewicz's translation of Matthew Lewis's poem "The Exile" and then Mickiewicz's translation of the "Good night" song from Canto I of *Childe Harold*, and show how two strongly stylized English poems drawing on popular conventions were rewritten to suit the Polish needs.

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[1] "Przodki kształcą język, to poeta znajdować musi, to na niego oddziaływa. Nim w Polsce język, jakim *Don Żuan* pisany, ukształci się, długo czekać trzeba" (qtd. in Żmigrodzka 1956: 122), my own translation. All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated.

But I would like to start, with the poem for which at that point Mickiewicz believed that it was not possible to create a Polish equivalent. In Canto II of Byron's *Don Juan* after the discovery of his affair with Julia, Juan bids farewell to his native Spain:

> "Farewell, my Spain! A long farewell!" he cried,
> "Perhaps I may revisit thee no more,
> But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,
> Of its own thirst to see again thy shore:
> Farewell, where Guadalquivir's waters glide!
> Farewell, my mother! And since all is o'er,
> Farewell, too dearest Julia! – (here he drew
> Her letter out again, and read it through.) (st. 18, Byron 1958: 63)

As Paul Elledge notes (1991: 43; 56 note 1), the passage records one of numerous "dissociative events" in Byron's poetry. Byron is clearly parodying conventional farewell poems and songs, and Juan's lament is soon to be cut short by a fit of retching caused by seasickness. The elegy on which Byron might possibly be drawing is Matthew Gregory Lewis's poem "The Exile," which was published in Lewis's *The Monk* and often reprinted in periodicals, for example, in Coleridge's review of the novel. In 1797 Coleridge had erroneously predicted that the "following exquisitely tender elegy [...] will melt and delight the heart, when ghosts and hobgoblins shall be found only in the lumber-garret of a circulating library" (Coleridge 1797). In *The Monk* the song appears as a lament of Gonzalvo on leaving Spain for Cuba, and is shown by Elvira to Lorenzo to prove that there is no greater torture than leaving one's homeland. We are dealing with a stylization of traditional farewell songs:

> Farewell, Oh native Spain! Farewell for ever!
> These banished eyes shall view thy coasts no more;
> A mournful presage tells my heart, that never
> Gonzalvo's steps again shall press thy shore. (Lewis 1998: 215)

By incorporating the clichéd phrases and the actual rhyme (No more/shore) from "The Exile," Byron may be seen as exposing the predictability and banality in Juan's lament.

Interestingly, a translation of Lewis's poem closes the second volume of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's *Miscellaneous Writings in Verse and Prose* (*Pisma rozmaite wierszem i prozą*) published in 1805, where it appears as "Wygnaniec" ("The Exile"), subtitled "Elegy imitated from the English, composed at sea on

the author's leaving his homeland in 1804" ("Elegia naśladowana z angielskiego; pisana na morzu w czasie oddalenia się autora z oyczyzny"). Right from the beginning Niemcewicz's tone is much more personal than that of Lewis's original:

> Żegnam cię o oyczyzno! żegnam cię na wieki!
> Smutne przeczucie w piersiach odzywa się tkliwych,
> Że te oczy, te łzami zroszone powieki
> Już więcey nie zobaczą twych brzegów szczęśliwych. (Niemcewicz 1805: 427)
>
> I bid thee farewell oh my homeland! I bid thee farewell for ever!
> A sad presage awakens in my tender bosom
> That these eyes, these tear-dimmed lids
> Will never again see thy happy shores.

Lewis's "native Spain" is replaced by "homeland" and "Gonzalvo" is replaced by the speaker whom the reader is clearly expected to identify with Niemcewicz, as suggested by the authorial note. While, as Juliusz Kleiner has noted (1981: 147–48, note 8), Niemcewicz is quite faithful to the original in spite of omitting two stanzas from Lewis's poem, his version is imbued with personal feeling. Lewis's generalized images tend to be replaced by much more particular and more strongly emotionally marked terms. Thus, for example, Lewis's lines (which echo Thomas Gray's elegy):

> No more my arms a Parent's fond embraces,
> No more my heart domestic calm must know;
> Far from these joys, with sighs which Memory traces,
> To sultry skies and distant climes I go. (Lewis 1998: 216)

Become in Niemcewicz's version:

> Już mnie matka do swego nie przytuli łona,
> Już nie uyrzę przyjaciół, ni braci kochanych;
> Próżno drogie wspomnienia wraca myśl strapiona,
> Spieszę do parnych niebios, i krain nieznanych.
>
> My mother will never again hold me to her bosom
> I will never again see my friends nor beloved brothers
> In vain do distressed thoughts trace fond memories
> I go to sultry skies and unknown lands.

The "parent" is substituted by "mother," abstract "domestic calm" and "joys" by the concrete "friends" and "brothers." If we choose to look at Lewis's poem from

the post-colonial perspective, we could say that he uses the demonized vision of all the perils that await white man in the West Indies, where Gonzalvo goes as a Spanish colonist, to hyperbolize the speaker's alienation from society which he after all leaves because of his decision to marry for love. The horror of tigers, snakes, the yellow plague and the boiling heat which is bound to make him "die by piece-meal in the bloom of age" (Lewis 1998: 216) is nothing as compared to his homesickness. Though Niemcewicz includes Lewis's Gothicized exotic imagery in his adaptation, the images of mental agony of the speaker are presented in much more subdued tones without the strong medieval stylization, which is striking in Lewis.

Niemcewicz's adaptation of Lewis's "The Exile" was meant to be read as a personal confession of displacement on the part of the man who in 1804 thought that he was leaving his country for good to settle in the United States. Thus the theme of exile, which for Lewis was a pretext for a tender elegy, and which actually involved the colonization of the Caribbean, acquired poignant immediacy in the context of early nineteenth-century Polish history.

For Byron, on the other hand, Juan's homesickness is partly a natural feeling fuelled by his love for Julia, and partly a re-enactment of conventional grief fed by cultural conventions, which is emphasized by Juan casting himself in the role of an exile and a constant lover. Byron's narrator sympathizes with his naivety, simultaneously assuming the stance of a man of the world:

> So Juan wept, as wept the captive Jews
> By Babel's waters, still remembering Sion:
> I'd weep – but mine is not a weeping Muse,
> And such light griefs are not a thing to die on;
> Young men should travel, if but to amuse
> Themselves; and the next time their servants tie on
> Behind their carriages their new portmanteau,
> Perhaps it may be lined with this my canto. (st. 16, Byron 1958: 62–3)

Already in 1812, in the song "Good night" from Canto I of *Childe Harold* Byron provided a radical rewriting of the traditional farewell song, and it is intriguing why this song was one of the first poems by Byron that Adam Mickiewicz translated. It was published in *Dziennik Warszawski* (Warsaw Journal 3: 69–72) as "Pożegnanie Czajld Harolda" ("Childe Harold's Farewell") in 1826 at the time when Mickiewicz was exiled into Russia, travelling in the Crimea. However, we know that he had started working on his translation of "Good Night" in May 1823 in Vilnius and Odyniec recollects Mickiewicz suddenly

growing pale on reading out the words "Kiedy nikt po mnie nie płacze" (When no one cries for me) from his translation (Kleiner 1995: 452, note 12).

Byron's text appears in Canto I as a song that Harold sings on leaving England. It glorifies the life of the self-exiled, alienated protagonist, who has no regrets on leaving his homeland.[2] In his preface Byron declares that the poem was suggested by "Lord Maxwell's Good Night" from Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Byron 1980: 4), but the Scottish ballad is essentially verbally echoed only in the opening "adieu" and closing "good night." Lord Maxwell bids farewell to his mother, his wife and his lands, which he has to flee as he is guilty of murder he committed avenging the death of his father:

> Adieu! Dumfries, my proper place,
> But and Carlaverock fair!
> Adieu! my castle of the Thrieve,
> Wi' a' my buildings there;
> Adieu! Lochmaben's gate sae fair,
> The Langholm-holm, where birks there be:
> Adieu! my ladye and only joy,
> For, trust me, I may not stay wi' thee.
> "Lord Maxwell's Good Night"

Byron's Harold has no regrets and flaunts his self sufficiency and cynicism as contrasted with natural homesickness of his page and of his yeoman. The very focus of the song is on the moment when the "native shore" disappears from sight at sunset. While in Lewis's "Exile" the speaker wants the ship to keep still so that he can behold his native shore, Harold embraces the swift movement of the ship and glorifies his alienation: "With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go / Athwart the foaming brine; / Nor care what land thou bear'st me to, / So not again to mine." This is not to say that that there are no traces of melancholy in the poem, and it is particularly these phrases that Mickiewicz emphasizes and develops in his translation.

In his fundamental work on Mickiewicz, Juliusz Kleiner expresses his bewilderment on Mickiewicz's decision to translate Byron's poem:

> One cannot but wonder how someone who on publishing the poem had already experienced bidding farewell to his native land could have included in the editions of his poetry stanzas whose beginning and end: "Fare thee well, my beloved na-

[2] For a reading of the poem as fraught with ambiguities concerning Byron's attitude towards parting, see Elledge 1986.

tive land," "Fare thee well, dear homeland" ironically distort allegedly heartfelt epithets.[3]

However, it is hard to read Mickiewicz's translation as a cynical version of traditional farewell songs. Wacław Borowy (1999: 169–70) argues that Mickiewicz completely ignores the ironic overtones of the original and imbues his version with strong lyricism. Or it may be more accurate to say that through his choice both of the vocabulary and of the rhythm he underscores the emotional ambiguity of the song: the notes of lament are more markedly audible under the decadence and world-weariness of Harold.

Adieu, adieu! My native shore
Fades o'er the waters blue;
The Night-winds sigh, the breakers roar,
And shrieks the wild sea-mew.
Yon Sun that sets upon the sea
We follow in his flight;
Farewell awhile to him and thee,
My native Land – Good Night! (Byron 1980: 13)

Characteristically, Mickiewicz appropriates Byron's text to express the lament over the life of an exile:

Bywaj mi zdrowy, kraju kochany!
Już w mglistej nikniesz powłoce,
Świsnęły wiatry, szumią bałwany
I morskie ptactwo świergoce.
Dalej za słońcem, gdzie jasną głowę
W zachodnie pogrąża piany!
Tymczasem słońce, bywaj mi zdrowe,
Bywaj zdrów, kraju kochany! (Mickiewicz 1998: 158)

Byron's "adieu" is translated as "fare thee well," which might be a conscious echo of Byron's famous "Fare Thee Well," the translation of which entitled "Bądź zdrowa" Niemcewicz published in 1820. Mickiewicz in the very first line uses the apostrophe to "[his] beloved country," which replaces Byron's "native shore." The speaker's alienation from the world expressed by Byron's

[3] Dziwić się można, że strofy, w których początek i koniec: "Bywaj mi zdrowy, kraju kochany!" – "Bądź zdrowa, luba ojczyzno!" – ironią wykrzywia epitety rzekomo serdeczne – że strofy takie pomieścił w wydaniach poezyj swoich ten, który drukując je wiedział już, co znaczy pożegnanie ziemi rodzimej (Kleiner 1995: 453).

"And now I'm in the world alone, / upon the wide, wide sea" (obviously inspired by Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*) is replaced by "I am roaming in the wide world / Living the life of an exile" ("Teraz po świecie błądzę szerokim / I pędzę życie tułacze," Mickiewicz 1998: 160–61, st. 9). A rather condescending Byronic refusal to "groan for others / When none will sigh for me?" is substituted by the melancholic "Za kim mam płakać? Za kim i po czym / Kiedy nikt po mnie nie płacze" (Why should I cry / For whom and over whom? / When no one cries for me). Mickiewicz is obviously not willing to faithfully follow the Byronic model, though there are enough echoes of the original to make Kleiner wonder why someone as devoted to his homeland as Mickiewicz could have chosen this passage for his translation (Kleiner 1995: 453). There is a certain dramatic irony in the fact that Mickiewicz made his translation in May 1823, a few months before his arrest for being a member of a nationalist organisation in October and a sentence of exile to Russia as though anticipating his future life of an exile.

In his unpublished article on Goethe and Byron written in 1827 Mickiewicz presents Byron's poetry as personifying the British spirit:

> American Revolution and the long and continuous war with France, party divisions among the English themselves – all that preoccupied the public; there emerged a great number of new conceptions, ideas and emotions; however, there was no poet to express them. That was an enormous mass of combustible subterranean materials, searching for a new crater in the local mountains.[4]

Mickiewicz seems to be drawing on Byron's description of poetry as "the lava of the imagination" (Byron 1974: 179), but he replaces Byron's individual torrent of passions and thoughts with the new ideas of the turbulent turn of the century in Britain. This is linked to his belief that poetry needs to be perceived in historical terms as a product of a given age and culture. Mickiewicz sees Byron's poetry as subjective, characterized by passion, but this, for him, is indicative of the British feeling at the time. Byron is presented as the one providing other European poets with the creative impulse, including implicitly Mickiewicz, whom another Polish poet Krasiński referred to as the "Polish Byron" (qtd. in Windakiewicz 1914).

[4] Rewolucja amerykańska, uporczywa i długa wojna przeciwko Francji, stronnictwa dzielące opinią samych Anglików, wszystko to zajmowało publiczność; wyrobiła się wielka liczba nowych wyobrażeń, myśli i uczuć, brakło tylko poety, który by je wyśpiewał. Była to ogromna masa palnych podziemnych materiałów, szukająca w okolicznych górach nowego krateru (Mickiewicz 1999: 250–51).

Mickiewicz's reading of Byronic poetry as originating in the spirit of the age has its counterpart in the twentieth and twenty-first century criticism. Philip Martin reads the Byronic hero in *Childe Harold* as

> the psychological consequence of [. . .] alienation from the meaningful progress of history, a piece of self-fashioning which, however equivocal and awkward, represents a detached and wounded psychology that Byron understands as appropriate to the modern condition of historical and political bafflement. (Martin 2004: 97)

This may very well account for the popularity of Byron's poetry on the Continent, much more directly affected by the vagaries of history than Britain. Mickiewicz's translation of "Good Night" illustrates on the one hand the attractiveness of Byron's sceptical and misanthropic stance; on the other hand, it reveals Mickiewicz's unwillingness to embrace it full-heartedly. His speaker would like to break free of the societal bonds, but cannot help expressing his emotional ties to his homeland.

In his recent lecture Stuart Curran spoke of displacement as one of the central themes in the European literature of the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and saw this as a political and economic consequence of turbulent political events, starting with the partitions of Poland through the French Revolution to the Napoleonic wars. He suggested that Byron and Shelley went against this general pattern and embraced "placelessness," which could be attributed to their aristocratic, cosmopolitan background. If one accepts his claim, it becomes intriguing why precisely those two English poets appealed most to the imagination of the displaced and dispossessed in such countries as Poland and Greece. Of course, the most obvious reason lay in their well known declarations of opposition to all forms of tyranny. But I would argue that at least in the case of Mickiewicz's readings of Byron's poetry there occurred a case of appropriation of Byron's "placelessness" similar to the process which I presented in the case of Niemcewicz's translation of Lewis's "Exile." What in Byron's poetry serves as an expression of placelessness becomes transformed into a lyrical expression of the sense of displacement. Unlike Byron's Harold, who eagerly embraces his cosmopolitan alienation from his homeland, Mickiewicz's speaker depicts himself as a "displaced" person, not surprisingly as after all he is writing in Polish, the language of the displaced.

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